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Ignore the charlatans who say clean energy is too expensive | Opinion

Posted Jun 23, 2020

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It's no coincidence that people who live, work and play in New Jersey's most polluted environments are commonly people of color and the poor. Urban areas, particularly communities of color, have been convenient "hosts" for power plants, toxic waste disposal sites, massive incinerators and other environmental hazards.

Today, as a growing environmental justice movement fights to reduce dangers to our air, land and water, these communities face an additional threat – charlatans who play on years of vulnerability to persuade them to oppose clean, affordable energy sources that would help people who are challenged to sustain adequate heating and cooling in their homes, improve health, and create thousands of jobs.

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An event at Metropolitan Baptist in Elizabeth, like others recently held at various urban churches, featured a representative of a group with a friendly-sounding name: Consumer Energy Alliance. Don't let the name fool you. CEA doesn't have our local interests in mind. It's there to help dirty fossil fuel polluters keep making money by delaying the inevitable switch to clean, safe, affordable energy sources like wind and solar.

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The reputable Energy and Policy Institute found that CEA, run out of a lobbying firm in Houston, is “an advocacy front group” that “pitches a ‘consumer advocacy voice’” on behalf of “some of the country’s largest fossil fuel companies and trade associations.” Their main strategy is to mislead residents by producing academic-sounding “reports” and to give faith leaders talking points for news commentaries claiming clean energy would bring economic disaster to low-income residents. In short, CEA is doing the gas industry’s bidding in New Jersey to undermine the new state Energy Master Plan’s goal of 100% clean energy by 2050.

It’s hard to imagine anything more cynical than going to urban New Jersey communities – where childhood asthma rates exceed the state average and residents face unusually high cancer risk from diesel emissions -- with the misleading message that the answer to their problems is more reliance on dirty fossil fuels.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the need to address air pollution now more than ever. Still, CEA and its New Jersey cohorts, like Affordable Energy New Jersey, argue that we should support continued fossil fuel use rather than adopt forward-thinking clean energy initiatives, such as those included in the Energy Master Plan.

One of the most pressing issues that these communities face is the high burden of energy costs. Low-income residents pay about 7% of their income for energy, compared to the statewide average of 3%. By dedicating funding toward energy-efficiency measures, the state can help many families save on the cost

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and keep the heat on during the winter. The New Jersey Energy Master Plan acknowledges the need to implement these upgrades, and rather than take a step back toward fossil fuel use, the plan now needs to address the challenges that prevent low-income communities from obtaining these benefits.

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CEA peddles a false narrative that dangerous emissions, which worsen the impact of climate change, are down because of gas use. In fact, they are only down when compared to coal. What CEA *doesn't* say is that with wind and solar there are zero emissions.

These phony friends of consumers also fail to acknowledge that the cost of solar power has declined drastically in the past decade, or that the wind and solar industries will create thousands of good, local jobs. Instead, they offer the preposterous suggestion that people will be forced to spend thousands of dollars on new appliances as if the “energy police” will show up and seize their stoves and refrigerators.

In reality, incentives will be available to help people swap out less energy-efficient appliances – when they are ready to – and reap the benefits of lower utility bills as a result.

It used to be that polluters worked on urban communities to accept the notion that only by saying yes to industrial facilities could they have any hope of economic growth. It was as though they were saying you can have good jobs or good health, but not both. The updated and equally false version of the choice is: You can have clean air or low energy bills.

This time, let's not fall for that. We can -- and we will -- have both, by supporting New Jersey's Energy Master Plan.

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